Noise Thinks the Anthropocene: An Experiment in Noise Poetics

Aaron Zwintscher

Published by Punctum Books

Zwintscher, Aaron.
Noise Thinks the Anthropocene: An Experiment in Noise Poetics.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/76691

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2651401
The first and most necessary question to ask about this project is: did the experiment succeed? Well, yes and no. The project is noisy and it is about noise (or, rather, noise). It is repetitive and disjunctive, it is digressive and meandering, it is at times vague and at others pointed. And by that measure, it is a success. It meets the criteria that I set out: to create a work of noise theory that is itself noisy, that performs in the milieu it analyzes. It qualified (in an earlier form) as a valid Ph.D. dissertation and is here published as an academic monograph; again, success. Gonzo noise research.

But how noisy is it? For that, I must acknowledge that I am not in the best position to tell. Dwelling within this noise, this indeterminate text for so long, I found it difficult to recognize on my own what made conventional sense and what did not, what new lines of inquiry I was drawing from the project and which might have been accessible through more traditional means. I consistently found patterns and possibilities in associated disjunctive fragments, in associative leaps of logic that those who had not drowned in noise and noise research did not see.
The end project is certainly not as noisy as the raw text data, but is that a sufficient criterion? And even that randomly conjoined text is still shaped by the selection criteria I used to build my library of noise fragments. It is not simply an assemblage of possible words, phrases, syllables, or phonemes. In order to be noise, does it have to be as noisy as random text, chase some ideal of “pure” noise? Is that not just creating an arbitrary demarcation between the sufficiently and insufficiently noisy? And, as demonstrated above, demarcation creates its own noise, its own barriers, boundaries, and frontiers. In the end, then, I will contend that it is noisy and that it performs noise in a manner not present in other works of noise research, though the model might be difficult to repeat. Like a hunter tracking elusive and intelligent prey, this model will likely exhibit diminishing returns and new models will need to be continually invented and attempted.

The text, as it was initially compiled from the full 1,700 disparate quotations, did not, and, reasonably, could not articulate specific positions on any topic, even one as multifaceted and contradictory as noise. Drawing, as it did from both pro-noise and anti-noise camps, there were times where the text directly contradicted itself from one line to the next. And the matter of every noise text using a different working definition for noise was notable throughout. Further, as an aid to the combinatory process, indistinct subjects rather than specific nouns marked many of the quotations: the sentences were about “it” or “this” and the like. This allowed sentences with different topics to flow into each other and potentially create a partial coherence and sustained argument (even if contrary or unrelated to that of their original context). However, that vagary needed to be clarified or excised from the final text.

As mentioned above, these contradictions did not, initially, bother me. The text was multivocal and indecisive just as the concept of noise is multivocal and undecidable. Had the experiment been simply designed to see what happens, that would have been enough. The result would have been fairly predictable: when you randomly collect 1,700 noise quotes, you
get a randomly noisy text. But that would be much the same with randomly collected quotes on any topic or no topic at all or text randomly generated by algorithm. If writing were a random process, artificial intelligences would have overtaken the process long ago — only recently, through complex predictive algorithms, are they beginning to be used for writing the most basic reports. Something had to be done to clarify and contextualize the process, to shape and direct the textual noise just as I shaped and directed the sonic and visual noise of the bruit jouissance project into recognizable forms. The best metaphor for the writing process that I have is that my work was one of improvisation on and with noise over the indeterminate changes of the fragments on and of noise of the original text. Noise is, however, marked by failure. The failure of the initial raw text to approach sufficient meaning or value as a philosophical argument (my desire to let the noise be noisy, forcing the reader to drown in disinformation overload with the vague hope that eventually they might surf its high tide) is not the failure of the project as a whole. The raw text and its juxtapositions do offer new lines of thought. There is value to the project. It just did not lie in leaving the work unedited or confusing by distracting digressions or individual associative connections. Moreover, this final text is not noise. It is noisy and it is a work of noise, but it is not noise. It has meaning, it makes sense, it makes and supports arguments. It does so in a noisy and nonstandard fashion, but in doing so it cannot be noise-as-such.

Another related question, then, might be: Did the experiment work?

The arguments on which I chose to focus this text are what I consider the formative positions of thorybology. And, in editing the text down, this text became much more of an argument for or even a manifesto of thorybology as a distinct noise theory/practice. These arguments include: being-as-noise, noise only being thinkable as noise, the interruptive potential of noise, the need to use the creative and constructive potentials of noise against the oppressive and limiting
potentials of noise, the possibility of reimagining the human relationship to the planet and the Anthropocene by a rethinking of our being-as-noise, and the possibility of that reimagining being used to limit the present climate crises. These theses weave their way in and out of the ( )holes and ruptures in the text, fading away only to be brought back, restated, clarified, fragmented, and retooled. And even with my additions and clarifications, they remained noisy.

But do they work? Do the arguments presented in this text offer those hoped for means of rethinking being-as-noise to reimagine coexistence? I argue that they do.

This work, for its normative force, draws heavily from the ecological work of Timothy Morton. Morton argues for an ecological thought, a method and process of thinking and reimagining human action and existence in the Anthropocene. The contention of this text is that noise and thorybology are alternate means of articulating that ecological thought. Thorybology contends that the confrontation with our disastrous and disruptive being-as-noise might force a change to a creative and open being-as-noise. Only by facing up to the enormity of the Anthropocene, only by acknowledging the human role in climate change, in the sixth mass extinction, can we act to mitigate and (if at all possible) reverse the consequences. This acknowledgement, I contend, involves the recognition that, as a human species, we have never existed in some idealized or idyllic state of nature. Since before dispersing from the African continent, humanity has been a disruptive and invasive species and now that we are aware and able to be aware of the situation, we must address it. Given that being-as-noise can be traced to the first human migrations and the resulting mega-fauna extinctions and the restructuring and engineering of the planet that can be traced to the earliest forms of agriculture and domestication, being-as-noise is not merely an industrial or postindustrial phenomena. Thus there is no point in the past to aspire to, no level of technology that is appropriate and beyond which is noise. This isn’t to say that we aren’t more disruptive now, that humanity hasn’t caused more change in
the last few centuries than in all previous millennia. But rather, I argue, these are changes in degree, not in kind. We have always been noisy. Noise, I contend, is one means of articulating and expressing the attributes that differentiate us as a species, that make us adaptable and inventive, and thus that make us disruptive and dangerous. If that is the case, then the solution is not to silence ourselves (which would likely result in just silencing the disenfranchised, the powerful being able to find exemptions for their noise), but rather to find better ways of being-as-noise, better ways of imagining our being-as-noise. My experiment sketches a possible program for thorybology, a program that can and should be expanded and further developed so that the change it advocates can come to pass.

So back to the success or failure of the experiment. The experiment is both a success and a failure. While noisy, it is not noise and the only noise that is properly considered within the text is noise. That was an expected and inevitable failure. Further, it could not be left unedited without some authorial guidance on my part and still be considered a dissertation and that was the original purpose of this text. In order to succeed as a dissertation and as a monograph, the project had to fail to be noise. The raw text functioned as a beginning, as the means to generate novel juxtapositions that would indicate new lines of thought. It was incumbent upon me to follow those lines of thought forward. Randomization could not be counted upon to do that for me. However, the experiment worked. A text was generated, new lines of thought were explored, noise was researched and the resulting research remains, to a degree, noisy. As to the method’s efficacy with other concepts, that is a test that demands another experiment. And as to its success in inducing political change, we can only hope.